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INSTRUCTORS AS DESIGNATED LEADERS FOR FOSTERING ONLINE ENGAGEMENT: THE CASE OF ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Research in Progress

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Abstract

With the increasing need to understand pedagogy online, but also with the understanding that the role of designated leaders in online communities has not been examined, the paper presents a study that aims to examine how instructors in online learning platforms may impact, through their presence, participants' online engagement. The theoretical foundations of the study are based on a typology of different types of leaders' presence in the online context. In this research in progress paper, the research design of the study is described and expected contributions in the areas of online communities and eLearning are identified.

Keywords: online communities, leaders, instructors, presence, e-learning, online learning platforms

1 Introduction

There has been an increasing reference in the recent literature on online communities about the role of leaders in community success and growth (Burke and Kraut, 2008; Faraj, Kudaravalli and Wasko, 2015; Faraj and Johnson, 2011; Panteli 2016). With the majority of this literature giving attention to emergent leaders (e.g. Johnson, Safadi and Faraj, 2015), in this research in progress study, we extend research in the area of online community leadership by examining the case of appointed or otherwise known as designated leaders within the online space. In doing so, we take the case of online learning communities. These are communities that are formed, either formally or informally, with the aim to enhance members' learning and academic knowledge in specific disciplines. Such communities have a designated leader, the course instructor. As such, these communities provide a very good opportunity to examine the role and effect of designated leaders which has only received limited attention to-date. Further to contributing to the literature on online community literature, the study also aims to make a contribution to research on e-learning and pedagogy in online learning environments. Though there is a body of literature that has acknowledged the important role of instructors in the online learning environment (Wenger and Leimeister, 2012), there is still a gap in understanding the types of presence and facilitation that instructors can exercise and the impact that these may have on participants. With this study, therefore we aim to fulfil part of this gap.

In what follows, we present the theoretical foundations of the study drawing upon the literatures on online communities, online leadership and online learning platforms. Following from these, leaders' presence as the theoretical lens of the study is described and its relevance in the study explained. Then, the research site and research design and methods are discussed. Preliminary findings are presented and expected contributions are identified.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Online Communities

Online communities, described as groups of people who communicate, interact and develop relationships within a technology-mediated organizing space that is symbolically defined by topic of interest (Lee, Vogel and Limayem, 2002), have been found to benefit from governance and leadership practices that promote direction and coordination among participants. Several researchers agree on the importance of leadership in online communities, which according to them can effectively contribute to the establishment of community norms and explicit policies (Butler et al., 2008; Burke and Kraut, 2008, Preece and Shneiderman, 2009), enable coordination among members' interaction (O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007) and foster integration (Fleming and Waguespack, 2007).

Despite the growing interest in online communities and virtual interactions (see for example Faraj and Johnson, 2011; Ren et al., 2007; Wasko and Faraj, 2005; da Cunda and Orlikowski, 2008), there has been limited empirical research into leaders' behaviour online and how their participation or lack of it influences community interactions. This may be partly explained by the fact that a body of literature exists that argues that such communities do not require leaders as they can be self-organizing (Hiltz and Turoff, 2002), informal (Ganley and Lample, 2009) or organic (Ross, 2007). In the same vein, it has been argued that the leadership role may be distributed across several members, whereby it may become a collective rather than an individual matter (Raelin, 2003) and an emergent property of a group instead of a property of a single individual (Grint, 2010; Panteli and Tucker, 2009). In such cases, members

may be found to attain lateral instead of vertical authority, thus implying that they gain authority over the collective rather than individual members (Dahlander and O'Mahony, 2011). Scepticism, however, exists among some leadership scholars on the effectiveness of distributed leadership. Gosling, Bolden and Petrov's view (2009) is that the distributed leadership theory is more "rhetoric" than reality, whilst Pearce, Conger and Locke (2007) posit that this theory does not recognise the reality of the need for a top decision maker to make the final choice when different points of view are put across.

The limited literature on online leadership has given particular attention to emergent leaders. These studies elicited that successful leaders emerge from the interactions that take place within the online group or community (e.g. Carte, Chidambaram and Becker, 2006). As such, the extant literature suggests that for a member to become a leader, she should actively participate in several activities within the group or community, contribute to discussions and encourage other members to collaborate. The frequency with which virtual team leaders (Huffaker, 2010; Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999; Kayworth and Leidner, 2000; Yoo and Alavi, 2004) and online community leaders (Preece and Shneiderman, 2009) communicate with their team members has been seen as an indication of effective leadership.

Reference to moderators as leaders is also made in the literature. For example, Gairin-Sallan, Rodriguez-Gomez, et al. (2010) in their article "Who exactly is the moderator?" posit that "The moderator must provide leadership, and be a reference point. That way the participants' productivity can be enhanced." (p.307). Similarly, Edwards (2002) who discusses the role of the moderator in Internet discussions argues that the moderator must act as a discussion leader in online forums for these to be effective.

Further to the evidence that exists on distributed, emergent leaders and moderators, the literature also points to designated or appointed leaders (O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007; Wickham and Walther, 2007). Despite the acknowledging the existence of this role, this has not been explored further. With the aim to better understand the role of designated leaders online, we take a focus on online learning communities. We discuss this online context in the section that follows.

In what follows, we discuss the online learning environment as it comprises the research setting for this study.

2.2 Online Learning Platforms

Unlike online communities, online learning platforms are designed to impart knowledge in a formal way and are usually referred to as electronic learning (e-learning) platforms. While there is no single universally accepted definition for e-learning (Mouyabi, 2010), Cross (2004) uses the term to distinguish between online communities where learning takes place and the offline setting where learning happens in a non-technological enabled environment.

E-learning communities are transient unlike the aforementioned online communities, with members who are usually at the same level of knowledge in a given subject and are seeking advancement. This goes beyond being a group of people with shared common interests that are often identified with online communities. The activities in an educational e-learning environment have a finite and sometimes short time-span as they are developed for a specific period, normally the duration of the course at hand. The level and the nature of the study determine the type and quantum of leadership/facilitation required. Where an e-learning course is controlled by grades at the end of the learning process, the requirement for a 'guide on the side', that is a teacher who is present, varies by the level of programme and category of learner. Higher level e-learning programmes such as doctoral and master's level lend themselves to a more highly student-centred approach than would bachelor degrees, diplomas and certificates. The expectation of grades and credit accumulation at the end creates a need for an authority to lead the process. Lai (2015) examined the effect of pedagogical practices in an online doctoral programme and found evidence of knowledge construction within online learning platforms. The participants in Lai's

study were experienced practitioners in education. This facilitated a social constructivist and social cultural approach, allowing the construction of knowledge in a community of practice. Sharing information for learning and teaching are different. Sharing information among equals is acceptable when the knowledge base of the participants is high, as in Lai's study; yet, there was a leader in the study, albeit a student leader. Lower level programmes offered through e-learning attract participants who depend on instructor presence and rate interaction with the instructor as a high quality feature in e-learning (Cohen and Ellis, 2004; Abdellatief et al, 2011).

The intellectual role of online instructors is crucial (Bonk, Wisher and Lee, 2004) as this is the role that facilitates the asking of questions, probing responses and refocusing discussion. This study will examine the effect of such designated leaders from the perspectives of both instructors and participants. . The role of the instructor in increasing student engagement in the online environment has been recognised in the literature (e.g Ma, Han et al, 2015). In the specific study, however, emphasis has been on the design of the online programmes including the material and tools provided by the instructor to the participants. In another study, participants in online learning environments scored higher the discussion facilitator than in the blended learning environment (Hung and Chou, 2015). These studies support extant literature in online support groups where the facilitators were found to play a significant role in keeping the community going and encouraging interactions among users (e.g. Griffiths et al, 2014). Wegener and Leimeister (2012), identified the presence and facilitation of instructors as a critical success factor in online learning communities, both formal and informal. The same researchers acknowledge that it is uncertain what type of facilitation is more effective in this setting. Cashion and Palmieri (2002) suggest that the critical success factor in successful e-learning is the skill of the teacher in creating environments that combine learner support, on-and off-line activities and resources, and ideas to stimulate peer-to-peer communication. Discussing self-directed learning, one of the central concepts for a formal learning environment of the theory of andragogy, Cercone (2008) posit that participants need guidance as they progress toward self-direction if they are to become responsible for their own learning. On transformative learning theory that relates to the change that occurs in participants when they make meaning out of the world through experiences, Cercone (2008) states that participants need support to begin the process, and they must be actively involved as they incorporate new information into the old. Gorsky and Blau (2009), drawing on Garrison, Anderson and Archer, (2001) examined factors affecting participation and satisfaction on online learning forums, and found that teaching presence (instructors' expertise in the subject matter, design and management of learning) and social presence (the perceived presence of others in technology mediated environments) have a particular positive influence.

In our study, we build on this understanding and in particular, on the important role that instructors as designated leaders play in online learning communities by exploring the type of facilitation that they exercise and the impact that this has on users' own participation and engagement on the site. We draw on 'presence' as the theoretical concept for this study in order to help us articulate instructors' role in the online learning environment, taking into account that learning styles differ, particularly among adult participants.

2.3 Leaders' Presence

The leadership literature has endorsed a certain amount of presence to great leaders to explain their charismatic influence (Bryman, 1992). This is not surprising, as presence has been related to increasing attention, social impact and familiarity (Latanet, 1981; Zajonc, 1968) as well as to exhibiting interest

and care for others (Fries, 1967). In a study of charismatic leaders at times of crises, Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) found that effective presence is enabled by leaders being in situ at the scene of the damage or problem and at the time of crisis; providing inspiration and hope when people need it most. They also found that the role of digital media becomes significant in these cases as leaders' presence is portrayed to the wider and distant audience, thus exerting an even bigger and concurrent influence. Drawing on qualitative research where five online communities were examined, Panteli (2016) showed that online leaders' presence is identified in different forms such as interactive, instructive, stimulating and silent and for each the leader was found to exert a different influence on online community members. The characteristics of each of these types of presence are shown in table 1.

Forms of Leaders' Online Presence	Characteristics-key features of leader behaviour
Interactive	Leaders with interactive presence communicate regularly with community members, by adding their responses and engaging with them in discussions of interest to the community.
Instructive	Leaders with instructive presence exert influence through reminders, warnings and rules enforcement.
Stimulating	These leaders use their role as a way for inspiring community members, increasing their enthusiasm in the subject matter whilst motivating them to take action in their areas of interest.
Silent	Leaders with silent presence are primarily inactive in community interactions; they do not participate in discussions with members nor they directly respond to members' questions or concerns.

Table 1: Types of Online leaders' presence (adapted from Panteli, 2016).

With the extant literature in mind, the driving question of the study is: How do designated leaders present themselves within the online learning environment and with what effect? In what follows, we present the research site and methods adopted for this study.

3 Research Site

For the purpose of this study, we have chosen to examine the online learning programmes organised by the Business and Management Faculty (BMF) of Alpha University (a pseudonym). Alpha university is over 50 years old with over 40,000 participants. It offers programmes in multiple disciplines. The BMF e-learning programmes have been in existence since 2006 offered on a Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle) platform to participants in several countries.

The selected programmes are geared to adult working people, many of whom are self-sponsored. The entry requirement stipulates work experiences as mandatory. Many of the participants in the pro-

grammes hold senior positions in industry, commerce and government. The postgraduate (PG) programme has 14 courses online and two in fully face-to-face format. The undergraduate (UG) programme has seven courses all of which are fully online. Each course is referred to as a module in the programme; modules run for a period of 5 – 6 weeks. The modules include peer discussion and group activities which are assigned and led by the appointed instructors to the module. Assignments are submitted online for marking and some examinations are taken off-line in clinical examination conditions. Course material is disseminated mainly through the Moodle platform and by e-mail. Participants have access to Alpha University's virtual library; limited access to e-books is also a feature. Grades are revealed to participants through Alpha University's student management system. Over the period 2006-2012, the graduate level intake for the programme was 344 and the under-graduate level intake was 626.

Instructors are experienced subject matter experts whose teaching backgrounds, for the most part, are in face-to-face delivery and have transitioned to on-line teaching. Lecturing in the traditional sense does not take place on the e-learning platform of the BMF at Alpha University. The instructors act as facilitators providing audio and written material for instruction and directive purposes. They are expected to interact with the participants throughout the modules. In alignment with the aim of the study to examine the designated leaders' role online, in this study we will examine the different types of interaction and the level of leadership within the various modules with a view to determining the most effective fit of facilitation and learning style.

4. Research Design and Methods

The research approach was of a qualitative nature and was designed to include two phases with Phase 1 involving the collection of data from all the UG and PG courses during the academic year 2015-16 and Phase 2 involving interviews.

In phase 1, we collected data on all the 21 online courses between the period of the study. This included number of participants, number of instructors' posts, and pass rate. We also studied the participants' evaluation forms in an attempt to examine whether the designated leader had any impact on participants' level of satisfaction with the course. Further, we plan with the use of content analysis to examine the frequency and type of interactions between instructors and participants on the online learning platforms for all programmes for the whole duration of the courses.

Phase 2, which includes the main data collection, involves a series of interviews with a representative sample from the student participants and facilitators respectively. . At the time of writing, 6 interviews have taken place. Interviews are recorded and then transcribed. This Phase will be completed in Autumn 2016.

5. Preliminary Findings

Findings so-far indicate that where the instructor is an active facilitator (shown as a result of his or her number of posts in the online learning platform), participants' satisfaction as shown in the evaluation scores go up; however, more posts by the instructor do not necessarily show a higher pass rate among the student participants. These findings are also supported by the interviews. Interviewees were asked to identify two courses, with one being the most enjoyed and the other the least enjoyed. Following from this, they were asked to comment on the role of the instructor in the online course. Table 2 presents

exemplary quotes from the interviews carried out so-far which illustrate how instructor's limited or regular presence may impact participants' engagement on the online course.

	Regular presence of Instructor	Limited presence of Instructor
1	<i>"She affected me in a positive way. It was a positive vibe. It made me look at the everyday experiences of things that we do, knowing that things have legal implications and knowing that what you do now, even though you may not be the owner of it, or sitting being a spectator, it can implicate you, it can help you to understand that you need to cover perimeters... she brought that practical aspect to the course."</i>	<i>"It adversely affected my participation ...there was not adequate feedback to confirm whether you were going in the right direction, whether it was correct, whether your concept of the whole matter was on point; at least to guide you in the right direction..."</i>
2	<i>"...It was not only him saying OK, read this chapter and practice. He actually sent us samples after he had looked at our papers that we were submitting our assignment. He highlighted to us what our errors were when we could not see the errors."</i>	<i>"...the instructor gave minimal participation. For example, we only had two webinars. One was the day before the examination when he was telling us what to expect in the examination. I do not think that was nice. He did it twice. He gave us two group projects. When we asked for guidance on the group project he took a while to answer. He said he was travelling. The number he gave us to call him on was never answered, up to day. He took a while to answer us."</i>

Table 2: Exemplary Interview Quotes

6. Expected Contributions

The next stage of our Phase 1 investigation will involve content analysis of the online forums within the online learning platforms. This is scheduled to take place in June 2016 with the interviews for Phase 2 continuing until August 2016. Collectively, the contribution of the study is expected to be twofold: First, it will extend research in the area of online community leadership by examining the case of appointed or designated leaders within the online space. Second, it will generate new insights on the role of instructors in e-learning and the impact this has on participants' level of satisfaction and overall performance on the course. As such, the study will inform pedagogy in the online learning environment.

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